

WASHINGTON AND ANKARA BEGIN TO OVERCOME DIFFERENCES IN THE FIGHT AGAINST THE ISLAMIC STATE

After weeks of waiting and uncertainty, approximately 150 Iraqi Peshmerga fighters bound for the Syrian city of Kobani were finally allowed to enter Turkey early on Wednesday, October 29. According to statements made by Kurdish military commanders, they arrived in two groups, the first flying from Arbil to the Turkish airport of Şanlıurfa, the other crossing the border with a road convoy transporting heavy military equipment, including artillery pieces and much-awaited armor-piercing weapons.

Without giving any information about the location and timing of their arrival in the besieged city, a field commander added that his men were now waiting in a camp located near the city of Suruç (Pirsus), only 7 kilometers from the Syrian border. Moreover, Turkish security forces reportedly seized the Iraqi fighters' guns, officially to avoid any incidents before they are authorized to cross the Syrian border. Citing members of Turkey's intelligence agency Millî İstihbarat Teşkilatı (MIT), the Istanbul-based daily newspaper "Hürriyet" confirmed that they would assume the responsibility for coordinating the crossing, in order to prevent members of the local Kurdish minority to join the Peshmergas.

As ESISC has previously mentioned, the Turkish government wants above all to avoid the strengthening of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which could benefit from a Kurdish victory in Syria. It is indeed worth mentioning that the Peshmerga's convoy was cheered by the local population, reflecting the extent of their popularity in the provinces of south-eastern Anatolia inhabited mainly by Kurdish people.

Meanwhile, the deputy to Barack Obama's Special Envoy on Counterterrorism, Brett McGurk, welcomed the deployment of the Peshmerga fighters as an important milestone in the building of the US-led coalition against the "Islamic State" terrorist group. Over the past weeks, the issue of the level of support for the fight of the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) in Kobani created tensions between Ankara

and its western allies. In this context, the latest developments can therefore be seen as a breakthrough, even though the situation on the ground was presented on several occasions as hopeless in the last few weeks.

According to sources within Iraq's Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), the broad lines of the intervention strategy were already defined three weeks ago in a series of secret meetings with Turkey, the United States, and Syrian Kurds. However, in addition to Western pressures, it seems that the arrival of the Peshmerga convoy was coordinated with the consent of the YPG to see members of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) joining the fight against IS in Kobani. Meanwhile, the US military reportedly intensified airstrikes to save time as the IS continues to mobilize its forces.

While Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu repeated on Tuesday that a joint ground operation was the only way to retake areas captured by the IS, Kurdish forces were indeed reluctant until now to fight alongside the Syrian rebels, as they feared terrorist infiltrations within FSA's ranks. According to several reports from the field, between 50 and 200 Syrian rebels were eventually allowed to enter Kobane early on Wednesday morning, although it is not clear if they have already taken part in the fighting.

The next days will determine if fresh troops and heavy military weaponry will be sufficient to break the siege of Kobani and to prevent the city from falling entirely into the hands of the IS. It still remains unknown when, and under which conditions, the Peshmerga fighters will effectively join the frontline. Additionally, it is also unclear whether the FSA' rebels and the Kurdish fighters will coordinate efforts or if they will fight separately, hence undermining their capacities.

Regardless of the actual strategic value of the city, such an outcome would mark a major symbolic setback of the anti-IS coalition. On the contrary, the success of a joint operation involving western air resources and both pro-Turkish and Kurdish rebels would demonstrate the determination of the coalition to fight the terrorist group, despite huge divergences regarding Syria' future.

Finally, it should be noted that the situation might increase the terrorist threat within the Turkish territory, specifically in the border provinces, major cities such as Ankara and Istanbul, and in the areas frequented by tourists and foreigners. It is this delicate context that packages containing a yellow powder were sent last Friday to the consulates of Germany, Canada and Belgium in Istanbul. Although the powder later tested negative for any infectious agent, this case could be a part of an intimidation campaign against diplomatic missions in Turkey and Turkey's diplomatic missions abroad.

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